

ANATTA (NON-SELF)

[1]

by Ajahn Brahmavamso

***Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Samma Sambuddhassa
Sabbe Sankhara Anicca - Sabbe Sankhara Dukkha - Sabbe Dhamma Anatta***

"All conditioned things are impermanent. All conditioned things are suffering. All dhammas (all things conditioned and unconditioned) are anatta". These are the three basic factors of all existence. It is in order to penetrate these truths that we practice the Noble Eightfold Path. We equip our minds with power through the abandoning of the five hindrances[2]; then we can actually uncover these truths by experiencing the deep states of meditation. In fact, once one of these three basic characteristics of existence (ti-lakkhana) is seen in its fullness one will also see the other two in their fullness. As the Buddha said, "What is impermanent, subject to change, is suffering, and that by its very nature cannot be taken to be 'me', 'mine', or a 'self'. Whatever is taken to be a self will cause suffering" (SN 22, 59)[3]. In fact, the permanent happiness of a self is impossible.

The Buddha's teaching on anatta (non-self) is deep and profound because it challenges something very basic to our assumptions about life. The Buddha talked about avijja (delusion) being the root cause of all problems, of all rebirths, the root cause of defilements. He explained what avijja is through the teaching of the vipallasas (the perversions or distortions of view, thought and perception). Namely, the vipallasas say that by view, thought and perception we take what is dukkha to be sukha (happiness); we take what is impermanent to be permanent; we take what is not beautiful (asubha) to be beautiful (subha); and we take what is anatta to be atta, a self (AN 4, 49). Never in that teaching of the vipallasas did the Buddha say that we take what is self to be anatta. It's always something that is anatta that is taken to be a self. This is because throughout the Buddha's teachings there never was, in any way whatsoever, an atta (self) postulated.

Therefore, this Dhamma discourse will explain how the practice of deep meditation, combined with careful investigation uncovers the truth of anatta, so that the illusion of a 'self' can be removed.

"There is Nothing"

Towards the end of his teaching life, Ajahn Chah would visit the Western monks at Wat Pa Nanachat once a week to take a sauna for his health. He would also give a Dhamma talk before his sauna, to offer us some wisdom, encouragement and inspiration. On one of these occasions I remember that after the Dhamma talk, I thought for once, instead of going right away to help care for Tan Ajahn, I would sit meditation and use some of the inspiration from his talk to aid my meditation. So I went around to the back of the Dhamma hall at Wat Pa Nanachat, where no one was and I sat meditation. I don't know whether it was for half an hour or one hour. I had a very nice meditation, a very deep meditation. When I came out afterwards I had a lot of happiness and clarity in my mind.

Of course, the first thing that came to my mind after that meditation was to see if I could assist my teacher, Ajahn Chah. So I got up and started walking towards the sauna. Half way between the Dhamma hall and the sauna, I met Ajahn Chah coming in the opposite direction with two or three Thai laymen. He had completed his sauna and he was on his way back to Wat Pa Pong. When he saw me, he obviously perceived that I'd had a very deep meditation and that my mind was clear, so it was one of those occasions when he tried, out of compassion, to enlighten me. He looked me in the eye, as Ajahn Chah could do, and said, "Brahmavamso, tam mai?" which means, "Brahmavamso, why?" I said, "I don't know". He laughed and said, "If anyone ever asks you that question again the right answer is, 'Mai me arai' (there is nothing)". He asked me if I understood, and I said, "Yes", and he said, "No you don't".

I'll always remember his reply. As he walked off it was like a profound teaching that he had just shared with me. What he was actually saying here by his teaching, 'Mai me arai' was, there is nothing, just emptiness, anatta. This is a powerful teaching because in our world we always want to

have something. We always want to grab on to something, and to say "there is something". But actually, there is nothing.

Whether one looks at the body (rupa), feelings (vedana), perceptions (sanna), the mental formations (sankhara, which includes the will), or consciousness (vinnana)^[4], for each one of these - 'Mai me arai' - there is nothing there. This is the teaching of anatta. However, it is very difficult for people to accept such a teaching; that there is nothing. The reason that it is difficult to accept is because one almost always asks the wrong questions. It's well known that if you ask the wrong questions then you will get the wrong answers. So it's important to ask the right questions first of all. Looking through the suttas, (the collected discourses of the Buddha) one can find many instances of those questions being asked of the Buddha that did not lead to any purpose or have any use. These were thoughts or questions or inquiries that the Buddha said were wrongly formed, and most importantly, they were not conducive to Enlightenment.

What do You Take Your Self to be?

One of those wrongly formed questions is "Who am I?" This is an inquiry that many people in the world follow: "Who am I?" However, a little bit of reflection should make it very clear that this question already implies an assumption that you are someone. It already implies an answer. It's not open enough. Instead, one needs to rephrase the question from, "Who am I?" or even, "What am I?" to, "What do I take myself to be?" or, "What do I assume this thing called 'I' is?" Such questions dig very deep into one's avijja (delusion). Only then can one start to really look at what it is that one takes one's 'self' to be.

Consider the human body. Do you consider the body to be yours? It's very easy to say, "The body is not self" when one is young, healthy and fit. The test comes when one is sick, especially when that sickness is very deep and lasting, or can even be life threatening. That's when one can really see at a deeper level whether one is taking the body to be 'me' or 'mine'. Why does this fear arise? The fear is always because of attachment. One is afraid that something which one cherishes is being threatened or taken away. If ever a fear of death comes up at any time, that will show with ninety nine percent certainty, that in that moment one is seeing or thinking that this body is 'me', or is 'mine'.

Contemplate this body. Contemplate the death of this body, contemplate the contents of this body, and take it apart as it says in the Satipatthana Suttas (MN 10, DN 22). See that with whatever parts of this body, that it's just flesh and blood and bones. It's just the four great elements (earth, water, heat and air), just atoms and molecules and chemicals, that's all. Continually contemplating the body in this way, one will eventually break down the delusion that this body is substantial, beautiful, delightful and one's 'own'.

4 The Illusion of Control

When there is a self, there will be things that belong to a self. When there are things belonging to a self there will be control, there will be work, there will be doing. This illusion of a self (taking oneself to be something substantial) is what creates craving and attachment. This is what creates will. That's why when people take the body to be the self, then they go and take it to the gym, they take it to the beauty parlour, they take it to the hair dressers, they wash it, they preen it, they try hard to make it look nice. "This is important, this is me. It's my selfimage." Such people think that it's very important what they look like. They think that it creates their happiness. Other (wiser) people say how stupid they are. Other people tell the truth. The point is that if you take the body to be you, you will want to control it. Some people get upset when they start to get old and ugly and smelly. They start to get upset when they get sick, because they realise they can't control this body.

Some people who I've seen dying try and control their body to the very end. To be with someone when they are dying, and to see them struggling for the last breath, and trying to control everything, this is one of the saddest things to see in life. This is real suffering. Then you see those other people, who have more wisdom, those who can let go and not struggle at death. Realising that this body is not theirs any more, they don't care about it any more, and they don't try to control it. The 'controller' has gone. When this controlling has gone, then so much peace, ease and freedom naturally arises in the mind.

Achievements are Not Yours

Even deeper than the body is the stuff of the mind. First of all, let us consider the objects of the mind. So often people identify themselves with their thoughts, or with the perceptions or objects, which come up in their minds. For example, it's so easy to actually take one's achievements to be 'me', or to be 'mine'. If one takes any achievements to be 'me', or to be 'mine', the inevitable result of that is pride, and the attachment to praise. How much suffering results from pride? Every time one does something wrong, one will feel that there is some problem there. Very often because of pride, when one does something wrong, one may even break the precepts^[5] and lie, just out of taking one's abilities to be 'me', or to be 'mine'. That's why in the world when someone makes a mistake they usually say, "I wasn't feeling my self today". "When I do something right, that's the real me."

People often say that speaking in public is one of the most terrifying things that one can do. This kind of fear is always because of some attachment. One then needs to ask the question: "Fear of what?" "Fear of losing what?" It's always fear of losing what is called 'reputation'. That is to say, the delusions about what one takes oneself to be. All of these things are just conditioned. If I give good talks, it's just because I've had a lot of practice that's all. If I give bad talks, that has nothing to do with me either. Maybe it is because the tea isn't strong enough. It has nothing to do with me. Isn't that marvellous, to take away the sense of self from whatever one does? Then there's no sense of guilt, no sense of fear, of remorse. One doesn't go back afterwards and say, "What I did today was really rotten and horrible". It's just conditioning, that's all.

If one takes any success in meditation to be because of one's own abilities, then one misunderstands the law of causality, the law of cause and effect. For example, any skill in meditation that I have is nothing to do with me, it's just because of causes. It's not one's abilities or inabilities that stop success in meditation. Never think, "I can" or "I can't", that is just coming from a sense of self. Create the causes. Once the causes are there, then one will be able to experience jhanas^[6], one will be able to get Enlightened. When one gets to be skilled in creating the causes for deep meditation, creating the causes for insight, and creating the causes for liberation, then one will understand what bhavana (development of the mind) really means.

Thoughts are Not Yours

When thoughts come up in the mind it's both useful and fascinating for one to consider, "Why did I think that? Where did that thought come from?" Very often one can trace these thought patterns back to teachers who inspired you, either in words or in books. Why did you think that thought? Is it really your thought, or is it the thought of Ajahn Brahm, or maybe the thought of your father, or the thought of your mother? Where did that thought come from? Thought does not belong to you. Thoughts come according to their conditions, they are triggered in the mind because of causes. It's fascinating to see that thought is anatta, not 'me', and not 'mine'.

Why is it that thoughts obsess the mind? Thoughts come in and we grab hold of them. We make them stay because of the illusion that they are important. People sometimes have such nice thoughts, they come and tell me later, and they call them 'insights'. They are just thought, that's all. Just leave the thoughts alone. Don't take them to be 'mine'. If one takes thoughts to be 'mine', then one will go and beat someone else over the head with them, and argue about who's right and who's wrong. Letting them go is far more peaceful, far more joyful. Thinking is one of the biggest hindrances to deep meditation. Thinking so often stops one from seeing the truth, from seeing the true nature of things.

Therefore, give thinking no value. Give it no interest. Instead, give that value and interest much more to the silence. For those of you who have experienced long periods in meditation, where not a thought has been going on in your mind, isn't that nice, isn't that beautiful, isn't that just so lovely, when there is peace in the mind and not a thought coming up? Remember that, cherish that thought of no thought. Then it's a thought that ends thought. All truth, all insight, all wisdom, arises in the silence.

The 'Doer' is Not Self

If one thinks "I am in charge", if that delusion is still there, that will be a major hindrance to one's meditation. This will create restlessness, and there will be craving for this, that and the other. One will never be able to get into jhanas. However, one must understand that the 'doer' cannot let go of doing. This is like trying to eat your own head. That's what people often try and do. They try to do the non-doing. That's just more doing! It has to be like a change, a flip in the mind. It takes some wisdom to see that this 'doing' is just a conditioned process. Then one can let go. When one lets go.

wisdom to see that this 'doing' is just a conditioned process. Then one can let go. When one lets go, then this whole process just goes so beautifully, so smoothly, so effortlessly. With luck one might get into a jhana. In the jhana states the 'doing' has gone and it has stopped for a long time. Coming out again afterwards one will naturally think, "This is good, this is beautiful, this is wonderful". Then one will start to see this illusion of the 'doer'.

To do is to suffer. Doing is dukkha, dukkha is doing. When there is doing, it's like a wave on the lake. The stillness is lost. When the stillness is lost, like the rippled surface of a lake it distorts the image of the moon high in the sky. When the lake is perfectly still and nothing is happening, when no one is doing anything to disturb the moment, then the reflection is pure, truthful, real, and it's also very beautiful. The jhanas should give one enough data to see once and for all that this thing, that which we call 'the doer', is just a completely conditioned phenomenon. That insight has profound effects afterwards. Sometimes people ask the question, "If the will is not yourself, if it's nothing to do with you, why bother? Why even bother to get up at four o'clock in the morning and meditate?" The answer is, "Because you've got no choice".

'The Knower' is Not Self

Even deeper than 'the doer' is 'the knower'. The two actually go together. One can stop 'the doer' for a little while in the jhanas, but later it comes back again. One even can stop 'the doer' for aeons by going to the jhana realms after one dies. However, it will still come back again. Once there is a 'knower' it will react to what it knows, and it will create 'doing'.

'The knower' is usually called consciousness or citta (mind), which is what knows. That knowing is often seen to be the ultimate 'self'. Very often people can get the perception, or the paradigm, in their minds of perceiving something in here, which can just know and not be touched by what it knows. It just knows heat and cold, pleasure and pain. It just knows beauty and ugliness. However, at the same time (somehow or other), it can just stand back and not be known, and not be touched by what's actually happening. It is important to understand that the nature of consciousness is so fast, so quick, that it gives the illusion of continuity. Owing to this illusion, one misses the point that whatever one sees with your eyes, or feels with the body, the mind then takes that up as it's own object, and it knows that it saw. It knows that it felt. It's that knowing that it saw, knowing that it felt, that gives the illusion of objectivity. It can even know that it knew.

When philosophy books talk about 'self reflection' or 'self knowledge', the fact that not only do "I know", but that "I know that I know", or that "I know that I know that I know", is given as a proof of the existence of a self. I have looked into that experience, in order to see what actually was going on with this 'knowing' business. Using the depth of my meditation, with the precision that that gave to mindfulness, to awareness, I could see the way this mind was actually working. What one actually sees is this procession of events, that which we call 'knowing'. It's like a procession, just one thing arising after the other in time. When I saw something, then a fraction of a moment afterwards I knew that I saw, and then a fraction of a moment afterwards I knew that I knew that I saw. There is no such thing as, "I know that I know that I know". The truth of the matter is, "I know that I knew that I knew". When one adds the perspective of time, one can see the causal sequence of moments of consciousness. Not seeing that causal sequence can very easily give rise to the illusion of a continuous 'knower'. This illusion of a continuous 'knower' is most often where people assume that their 'self' resides.

However, as it says in the suttas, one can see that even knowing is conditioned (sankhata) (MN 64). One can see that this too rises because of causes, and then ceases when the causes cease. This is actually where one starts to see through the illusion of objectivity. It is impossible to separate the 'knower' from the known. As the Buddha said many times, "In all of the six senses, such as the mind base, when mind base and mind objects come together it turns on mind consciousness. The coming together of the three is called phassa (contact)" (eg. MN, 28). Consciousness is conditioned, it has its causes, and it's not always going to be there. During the experience of jhana one is totally separated from the world of the five senses. All five senses have disappeared. All that's left is mind, mind base, mind experience. One then knows clearly what mind (citta) is.

Understanding the Nature of Consciousness

Once one knows what mind consciousness is (mind activity, the mind sense), then one can actually notice outside of the jhanas, in ordinary worldly consciousness, that whatever one sees is followed immediately by a different type of consciousness. Different types of consciousness are arising and

immediately by a different type of consciousness. Different types of consciousness are arising and passing away, one after the other. Maybe it's another sight consciousness, and then mind consciousness, or maybe taste consciousness, and then mind consciousness. This mind consciousness follows immediately, so close behind the other five types of sense consciousness, that it gives the five senses an illusion of similarity. When one sees something, when one hears something or feels something with the body, what is in common with those experiences? What gives it the illusion of sameness? After experiencing jhana one will know that there is this mind consciousness always following behind; holding the hand, so to speak, of the other five senses. Once one sees that, then one can understand why there's an illusion of continuity in the experience of consciousness.

'Knowing' is like the particles of sand on a beach. From a distance it looks like there is no gap, no space, between those grains of sand. Then one goes closer and closer and closer and sees that there are just grains of sand, and in between those grains there is nothing. Nothing runs through those grains of sand. Like water in a stream. It looks like there is a continuous flow. However, once one gets closer with a microscope, an electron microscope, one can see that between the water molecules there is nothing, just space. One can then see the granular nature of consciousness. One consciousness arises and then another disappears. As it says in the Satipatthana Samyutta, "cittas arise and pass away" (SN 47, 42).

A person who still thinks they are the citta (mind), 'the knower', might be able to let go of the body, and get reborn into the jhana realms. But they would have to be reborn into this world again. They are again subject to more rebirths, more suffering. This is because they haven't fully let go of bhava (being). This person has not yet eradicated bhava-tanha (the craving to be), which results from taking the 'knower' to be self. It's like the simile of the tadpole. The tadpole is hatched in the pond, always in the water, and therefore it can't understand what dry land is. However, when the tadpole grows up to be a frog and leaves that water for the first time it carries the water on it's back. It's wet and slimy, but at least it knows what dry land is and it gets an idea for the first time what dryness is.

Getting Out of the Pond, and Onto Dry Land

The only way that one can understand what is meant by, "the self is not 'the doer'" is to get into a jhana. This means that one is getting out of the pond of doing. The only way that one can really understand that 'the knower' is not self, is to get out of the pond of the five senses, and to stay just with the sixth sense. With just the mind consciousness remaining, then after a while, whether one likes it or not, whether one thinks it's true or not, one will actually see that that which is called 'knowing' just arises and passes away. It is granular, it is fragmentary.

The whole purpose of these jhanas is to learn through practice, bit by bit, to let go of more and more consciousness. It's like slicing away at mind consciousness. Allowing consciousness to cease, by calming it, settling it, and allowing it to go to cessation. Then the consciousness completely ceases for long periods of time in what's called nirodha-samapatti (the attainment of cessation). This is the cessation of all that is felt and all that's perceived asanna-vedayita-nirodha). Any person who experiences this attainment, they say, will be an arahant or an anagami afterwards. Why? Because they've seen the end of consciousness, they've touched that as an experience.

With this experience there is no longer any thought or theories or ideas. This is bare experience. All that one formerly took to be 'me' is seen as just delusion (avijja). What was anatta? One will realize that for many lifetimes, one had taken all these things to be a self, and that the result was so much birth and consequent suffering. The cause was so much controlling and doing and craving (tanha). Wriggling through Samsara, wriggling towards happiness, wriggling away from pain, always trying to control the world. It's not what one would like to see. However, through the experience of the jhanas, and the surmounting of conditioning, one has gone beyond all of that. It is not what one has been taught. It is what one has seen, it is what one has actually experienced. This is the brilliance of the Buddha's teaching of anatta. It goes right to the heart of everything.

They say that the Dhamma is the source. One is not going outwards to its consequences, one is not getting lost in papanca (mental proliferation). One is going right in to the very middle, the very essence, and the very heart of the atta, what one takes to be 'me'. From the body into the mind, from the mind into 'the doer', from 'the doer' into 'the knower', one can then see that one is not 'the knower'. It's just causes and conditions. That's all it is, just a process. Then one will understand why the Buddha said that he doesn't teach annihilation. Annihilation means that there is some thing there that existed, which is now destroyed. Now did he teach eternalism (that there is some thing there that

that existed, which is now destroyed. nor did he teach eternalism (that there is some thing there that is never destroyed). He taught the Middle Way, namely Dependent Origination.

The process that one has taken to be a self for all these lifetimes is just an empty process. Cause effect, cause effect, cause effect - just a process. "When there is this, this comes into being. With the cessation of that, that ceases." That is the heart of the Buddha's teaching. Everything is subject to that law. If one can see everything as being subject to that law, then one has seen fully into the nature of anatta. Samsara has been mortally wounded; and one will soon make an end of all birth, old age, death and suffering. If, however, there is just a tiny bit left, which one hasn't seen, just a tiny bit - that can keep one stuck in Samsara for aeons. Sabbe-dhamma-anatta'ti. The whole bloody lot!

[1] Dhamma discourse given by Ajahn Brahmavamso at Bodhinyana Monastery on 19th September 2001, during the annual three-month Rains Retreat. [[back](#)]

[2] The five hindrances are: sensual desire, ill will, sloth-and-torpor, restlessness-and-remorse, and doubt. In the suttas these are said to be the 'nutriment' for ignorance (AN 10, 61). [[back](#)]

[3] References to suttas: AN = Anguttara Nikaya, MN = Majjhima Nikaya, DN = Digha Nikaya, SN = Samyutta Nikaya (references to book number, then sutta number). [[back](#)]

[4] These are the five khandhas, or 'groups of existence', which the Buddha taught compose the entirety of sentient human existence. [[back](#)]

[5] In Buddhism there are 5 core precepts, (moral codes) for wholesome bodily and verbal conduct, which are undertaken; to abstain from: killing, stealing, sexual misconduct (ie. adultery), false speech, and intoxicants like alcohol, which give rise to heedlessness. For monastics the main additional precepts are: celibacy and not handling money. [[back](#)]

[6] Jhanas - deep states of meditative 'absorption', where the mind becomes united with one object for long periods of time. In these states the five hindrances have been abandoned. The mind dwells within itself and in these states of refined bliss there is no impingement at all from the five external senses. [[back](#)]

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